

Let's go outside

A bit of fresh air won't just put some colour in your cheeks – it can also help burn calories.

Rebecca Armstrong reports

Outdoor gym

Exercising outside can burn up to 30 per cent more calories than doing the same workout indoors – a statistic that makes venturing away from the gym a tempting prospect. With this in mind, I've decided to see whether I feel any healthier after a spell in the great outdoors.

Instead of being housed in a climate-controlled building, this "gym" is open to the elements. The idea behind outdoor gyms is that they provide people with gym-grade equipment for free, plus, because the equipment requires no electricity to run, it's much greener than its indoor counterparts. And, according to Sport England, "cost" and "access to quality facilities" are the two main reasons why people avoid exercise.

Tucked away in a corner of the University of East London's docklands campus is a collection of the most colourful exercise equipment I've ever seen. Although there's a brisk wind coming from the Thames, I soon warm up on the exercise bike then get stuck in to pumping some iron, my body weight providing a more than ample amount to lift.

I picture the dockside facilities on a summer's day and am envious of the students who have the opportunity to use this free fitness park whenever they like. Already popular in China and Australia (well, the Aussies have the climate for it, after all), outdoor gyms are starting to appear across the UK. Georgina Tarrant, managing director of the Great Outdoor Gym Company, which created the area I've been working out in, tells me that a number of outdoor gyms are being planned in Scotland. "The idea is to provide young people with something positive to do," she says.

Meanwhile, a similar facility has just opened in Blackley, Manchester, but this is aimed at the over-60s. My time on the outdoor treadmill certainly beat spending an hour sweating in an air-conditioned gym and I only wish there was one close to where I live.

Cost: free

www.thegreatoutdoor gymcompany.com

Nordic walking

My first Nordic walking lesson starts in a warm, bright café with my teacher, Francis Mitchell, offering to buy me a cup of tea. I'm beginning to feel that this could be the outdoor fitness routine for me. First developed as a way for Finnish skiers to keep in shape during snow-free months, Nordic looks a lot like speed-walking while holding a pair of ski poles. It also burns from 280 to 400 calories an hour – 20 per cent more than your average potter around the park.

"The sports council of Finland has done extensive research on it and found that Nordic walking is a fantastic all-round workout," enthuses Mitchell as he hands me my poles. To begin with, he tells me to practise walking rhythmically, taking long steps. When I've mastered that, I'm allowed to strap the poles to my wrists and drag them behind me as I get a feel for them.

Mitchell tells me that it's a great low impact exercise because it takes the pressure off the

knees, legs and back. He then shows me the right way to place the poles as I walk, basically matching my right leg to my left pole and vice versa, and we set off around Regents Park.

Because we're walking briskly rather than running, we can actually talk – rather than gasp – as we go. "The social side of it is a big sell," explains Mitchell. "A common misconception is that Nordic walking is only for older people or for rehabilitation. It's not – it can be done by anyone."

Stepping up the pace a little, Mitchell shows me how to tackle hills and slopes – going downhill, it's important to bend the knees and lean back – but in concentrating on not falling over, I lose my pole to leg co-ordination and start to panic. Mitchell tells me to go back to dragging my poles until I'm back in a smooth rhythm. I do so and it works.

It might seem like anyone can go out with a couple of sticks but there is a technique that needs to be learnt if you want to get the full health benefits. With more than 500 instructors in the UK, the activity is growing fast and I enjoyed my lesson so much that I Nordic-walked all the way home.

Cost: poles are priced from £50 and a one-hour taster lesson will set you back £15
www.nordicwalking.co.uk; 020-8878 8108

British Military Fitness

Since childhood I have had a recurring nightmare in which I have accidentally signed up for a tour of duty, à la *Private Benjamin*, and wake up in a cold sweat at the thought of being shouted at – if not shot at – for the next two years. So I'm nervous about joining an outdoor British Military Fitness session, led by a former member of the Honourable Artillery Company.

Designed to provide motivation and to stop minds and bodies getting bored, each BMF session gives a full cardiovascular workout through team games, paired exercises, circuits, anaerobic or strength work and running. Classes take place in 50 parks in 24 different cities across Britain. My class starts on a grey morning on Hampstead Heath, north London, where I meet my instructor, Barney Larkin, and the four other brave souls keen to get fit the old-fashioned way.

Larkin hands us numbered tabards – blue for novices like me, red for intermediates and green for advanced members – and I'm relieved to see that there's another blue, three reds and no greens. The class, Larkin explains, starts with a warm-up run, then some group exercises, followed by more dashing around the heath. We set off for our warm up and I swiftly realise I'm out of my depth, lagging behind right from the start. But Larkin is encouraging – "Come on, number three!" – and gives me the chance to catch up as we break into groups to do sit-ups, press-ups, and squats in the cold, wet mud. It's a world away from the gym, where I'd be doing some jogging and sipping from a chilled bottle of Evian, but British Military Fitness was founded, according to its creator Robin Cope, as an alternative to the " lycra-clad, Swiss ball-using, water fountain world of gyms".

Halfway through the class we are allowed to have a break – never have I been so glad to have a drink – before it's back to sprinting around a pond. I consider hurling myself in, but Larkin's shouted encouragement keeps me going. After almost an hour, it's time for a warm down and some stretches. On the floor. By the end, I'm howling with laughter and covered in mud. It's not as bad as I'd feared, but it's not for the faint-hearted or unfit.

Cost: free trial session, then from £20 for one session per week
www.britmilitfit.com;
0870 241 2517

Green Gym

If the narcissism of exercising in front of mirrors isn't enough to drive you from the gym, perhaps the idea of doing good while you get fit will entice you outside. That's the idea behind the BTCV (formerly known as the British Trust for Conservation Volunteers) Green Gym initiative. Participants can improve their health and the environment by offering local, practical environmental or gardening work. Which is why I'm up to my thighs in a pond in a South London nature reserve.

Mered Jones of BTCV is heading up today's three-hour session and is encouraging the nine of us who've come along to get stuck in. "We need to clear the paths, gather up rubbish and clear the ponds" – my cue to don the waders we've brought with us in the BTCV van. Research undertaken by the Oxford Brookes University found that the effects of the green gym were preventative and curative of both physical and mental conditions, plus one-third more calories were burnt during some activities by participants than if they'd been taking part in a step aerobics class.

Other benefits were increased bone density. Volunteers reported finding day-to-day activities easier, felt fitter and had more energy than before. In a study by the University of Essex, 94 per cent of patients said green exercise – gardening, walking or doing conservation work – lifted their depression.

As the sun comes out and the pond starts to clear there's a moment of excitement when I spot a newt on a bundle of pond weed. Jones warns us

not to touch the endangered beast as we gather round, admiring its orange belly. Newt-break over, I grab a litter picker and start lunging and reaching for far-flung sweet wrappers. At the end of the session I'm feeling pleasantly tired and pleased at the junk mountain we've cleared. Best of all, it hasn't cost me a penny.

Cost: free

www2.btcv.org.uk/display/greengym; 01302 388 883

